Saturday’s Frontier Conference football game between the Montana State University-Northern Lights and the UM-Western Bulldogs was played in Havre’s Blue Pony Stadium. But it sure was a day when Great Falls could be proud.

The Bulldogs shellacked the struggling Lights 60-15, but on both teams, and on both sides of the ball, natives of Great Falls impacted the game in big ways.

For the Lights, sophomore Zach McKinley added 91 yards rushing and 41 receiving to his already huge season. McKinley is a former CMR prep standout, and is having an unforgettable season, even if Saturday’s game was forgettable. McKinley has now rushed for 1,192 yards, an MSU-N single-season record, to go along with 14 touchdowns.

On the other side of the ball, Northern sophomore Tyler Craig, another Great Falls product, is having an equally big season. Craig leads the Frontier and is third in the NAIA with his 10 sacks. Saturday was his first game this season that he didn’t register a sack, but he still had seven tackles, including several big ones that prevented long Western gains.

The same Great Falls formula has worked well for the Bulldogs.

Sophomore running back Sam Rutherford, another Great Falls native, rushed for 11 yards and two scores Saturday, and in the process, broke UM-W’s single-season rushing record. In just two seasons at Western, Rutherford has now rushed for over 2,000 yards and 21 touchdowns.

Meanwhile, on a UM-Western defense that was absolutely stingy Saturday, holding Northern to just 15 points, 198 yards of offense and just seven first downs, the unquestioned leader of the unit is former Great Falls standout Phil Selin. Selin registered his seventh sack of the season Saturday, after leading the Frontier in sacks a year ago. A senior, Selin capped his career at Western with a winning season, and a great final game.

Overall, the Lights have five players on their roster from Great Falls, while the Bulldogs have four. So no doubt, the Electric City has had a big impact on both programs, and it certainly showed in Saturday’s game.

A Record Return

If anyone needed any evidence that the MSU-Northern Lights didn’t give up despite Saturday’s difficult beating at the hands of the bulldogs, than look no further than sophomore Jake Messerly.
With the Lights already trailing 50-0 late in the third quarter, Messerly was back to return a kickoff after Western’s most recent score. What happened next was magic, and on an otherwise forgettable day at Blue Pony Stadium, it showed why Messerly is one of the most electric young players in the Frontier.

Messerly fielded Connor Greth’s kick one yard deep in his own endzone, and raced out, where he was met by a wall of Bulldogs at the 20-yard-line. But instead of going down, and turning the ball over to the Northern offense, Messerly decided to end the shutout himself.

He broke two tackles, then sprinted up the left sideline for what eventually became a 101-yard kickoff return, which set a new MSU-N school record. In fact, Messerly’s kickoff return for a touchdown was Northern’s first since Stephen Silva set the Northern record with a 99-yard return for a score in 2009. Silva had two kickoff returns for touchdowns in his brilliant MSU-N career, while Messerly became the first Lights to do it in five seasons.

**Winning Season**

The Bulldogs’ 60-15 win over Northern Saturday wasn’t just about a single game. Instead, it was about ending a painfully long drought.

Once upon a time, Western was a premier NAIA powerhouse, and just over 20 years ago, the Bulldogs made it all the way to the NAIA semifinals. However, Western has hit some difficult times since, but Saturday brought all that to an end, and the Bulldogs, under head coach B.J. Robertson, might never look back.

In just his second season at the helm, Robertson engineered Western’s first winning season in a decade. The last time Western finished above the .500 mark was the 2004 season. And ironically, they beat the Lights on a last-second field goal in Dillon to make sure that winning season would happen.

So, after 10 long years, the Bulldogs are back in the realm of the winning. Western finished 6-4 in a loaded Frontier Conference, and won its last four games to do it. In the last four weeks, Western knocked off nationally ranked Eastern Oregon and Rocky Mountain College, then took care of College of Idaho and Northern.

The four-game winning streak allowed the Bulldogs to finish with a 6-5 overall record in a season that included playing at Big Sky Conference power Eastern Washington, which just beat the Montana Grizzlies 36-26 Saturday.

“They (Bulldogs) had higher goals when the season started, but once those goals weren’t attainable anymore, these guys refocused,” Robertson said of his team. “They wanted to have a winning season, and they were able to accomplish that with this win. So I’m extremely proud of this team.”

And the Bulldogs aren’t done. With what other teams lose to graduation this spring, and what the Dawgs have returning on both sides of the ball, Western will likely be a popular pick to contend for the 2015 Frontier Conference title.

**Learning Curve**

Northern freshman quarterback Jess Krahn stood on the sidelines and supported senior quarterback Travis Dean for the first seven games of his first year of collegiate football. All the while, learning and soaking up everything he could, knowing he’ll be competing for the 2015 starting job.

But, backup quarterbacks, no matter how young, know they’re just one play, one injury away from having to step up, and that’s the situation Krahn finds himself in, and found himself in as the Lights struggled mightily against Western Saturday.

With Dean suffering a season-ending leg injury at Eastern Oregon last month, Krahn will finish the season as the Lights’ starter. He made his second career start Saturday, and it was his second straight start against one of the best defenses in the Frontier. Last week, Krahn’s first-career start came against the No. 2 Carroll College Fighting Saints, who possess the top defense in the Frontier. And on Saturday, Krahn had to start against the No. 2 defense in the league, which belongs to the Bulldogs.
And while the process has been a difficult one, Krahn was sacked four times Saturday and has thrown five interceptions in his two starts, everything that is happening to the Bush Prairie, Washington native now will definitely pay off in the long run.

“We have to build on what he’s done the last two weeks,” Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said of his young QB. “We’ll go back and look at the film and see what he’s doing well, and also correct some of the mistakes he’s making. But I know we have to give him more time up front. I don’t think we did that good enough today. We have to be able to protect him better than we did today. But I feel like Jess is doing a good job, and he’s only going to get better with these experiences.”

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